


The courage to 'get naked': Stigma, disclosure and lived experience in sex work research

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Abstract

Stigma is widely acknowledged as an issue that causes significant harm to sex workers, forcing people to conceal their experiences. It has also been acknowledged that the stigma relating to sex work can impact researchers, who may experience stigma by association. However, researchers can also have personal experience of sex work themselves, which means they are impacted directly by stigma on several levels and must negotiate difficult decisions relating to disclosure and risk. In this paper, I recount the power that stigma has had over me, discussing the emotional challenges that this has created for me as a researcher and in my everyday life. Furthermore, I reflect on the complications of my positionality and argue that while lived experience is incredibly valuable, as researchers it is also important to be aware of the limitations of our own experiences.

Keywords

Stigma, sex work, emotion, disclosure, lived experience

Introduction

This paper is a reflexive account of my experience as a sex work researcher, in which I document how stigma has impacted me, reflecting on the complications of my positionality, and the inner dilemmas I have negotiated. As a researcher in this area, my work to date has focussed on the impacts of decriminalisation on sex workers in New Zealand, along with experiences of stigma and discrimination, and the impacts of anti-trafficking

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policy (see for example [Armstrong, 2010; 2014; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2021](#)). Although I have sought to foreground the experiences of sex workers in my research, for many years I have closely guarded my own experiences of sex work, in fear of stigma and its consequences. In this paper, I recount the struggles I have managed concealing my experiences as a researcher in this field.

Stigma has long been acknowledged in research as an issue that adversely impacts sex workers (for recent examples see [Benoit et al., 2018; Bruckert, 2012; Lyons et al., 2021; McCausland et al., 2022; Oliveira, 2018; Pheterson, 1993; Simpson and Smith, 2021; Stardust et al., 2021; Treloar et al., 2021 Wong et al., 2011](#)). Researchers of sex work have also outlined their own encounters with stigma ([Ahearne, 2015; Hammond and Kingston, 2014; Simpson, 2021; Stardust, 2020](#)), the various methodological and ethical challenges that can arise in sex work research ([Ferris et al., 2021; Huysamen and Sanders, 2021; Wahab, 2003](#)), the emotional impacts of doing research on sex work ([Sanders, 2006; Sinha, 2017](#)), and the experience of doing research as a person with lived experience of sex work (see e.g., [Ahearne, 2015; Colosi, 2010; Jones, 2020; Parreira, 2022; Ronai, 1998; Stardust et al., 2021](#)). Although the dilemma of whether to ‘come out’ as a researcher with lived experience has been explored to a lesser extent among sex work academics (for an exception, see [Bruckert, 2014](#)), this issue has been examined in other fields, for example among academics who use drugs, those who have criminal convictions, and LGBTQ+ researchers (see e.g., ([Author, 2021; Catoe, 2021; Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross et al., 2020](#))). This paper builds on this existing work, outlining how stigma has impacted me, and the emotional dilemma I have navigated relating to disclosure of my sex work experience. I do so by drawing on stigma theory, conceptualising stigma as a form of power, outlining the control it has had over me and the implications of this in my personal and professional life.

Stigma theory and sex work: A brief overview

Stigma is a concept most famously associated with the work of Erving Goffman, who defined stigma as an attribute or characteristic which marks a person as different in comparison to the ‘normals’ of society ([Goffman, 1963](#)). Those who are marked with stigma manage this, Goffman argues, by passing (performing their identity in such a way to appear as though they are a ‘normal’) or covering (going to great lengths to obscure their characteristic or identity factor that is subject to stigma). Those who can pass or cover in this way have what is termed concealable stigmatised identities, since they are able to hide the stigmatising attribute ([Quinn and Chaudoir, 2009](#)). Stigma can be ‘felt’ – a sense of inner shame and a fear of mistreatment within the stigmatised person – or ‘enacted’ – actual discriminatory treatment on the basis of the stigmatised identity factor or characteristic ([Scrambler, 2004](#)).

In the almost 60 years that have passed since Goffman’s pioneering work was published, stigma has evolved conceptually. Stigma theorists have sought to define more clearly what stigma is, moving beyond a framing of stigma as a static problem that exists within individuals, and conceptualising stigma as a dynamic social process ([Link and Phelan, 2001; Parker and Aggleton, 2003](#)). There has been an increasing focus on the

importance of unpacking how stigma is created, how it functions and is weaponised by those in positions of power, and how that translates into the lives of those it impacts (Scrambler, 2019; Tyler, 2020). Stigma is now widely understood as a form of power, a means through which marginalised individuals and groups are kept ‘in, down, and away’ by the stigmatisers (Link and Phelan, 2014, p. 24). The concept of stigma-power proposed by Link and Phelan works to identify the goals of the stigmatisers, and the ends through which they seek to achieve these goals. The argument that is central to this concept is that stigma will only be eroded if there is a change in the balance of power that makes it harder for the stigmatisers to achieve what they set out to do (Link and Phelan, 2014). Thus, stigma is now well-understood as a structural problem, which, although individually experienced, is designed into systems, institutions and various state apparatus (Hannem, 2012; Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Quinn, 2019; Scrambler, 2019; Tyler, 2020).

Sex workers are widely understood to be stigmatised. There is a long history of sex workers being framed as deviant, dangerous, dirty and threatening (Walkowitz, 1980). The stigma associated with sex work was famously discussed by Gail Pheterson in her 1993 essay ‘The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness’. In this essay, Pheterson unpacks several misconceptions about women who sell sex, and outlines the divisions between women imposed by norms regarding sexual honour. Those who sell sex are defined as ‘bad’ women, and are excluded from a range of contexts, including many social movements (Pheterson, 1993). Sex workers have also been framed, both historically and in more recent years, as vectors of disease, victims without choice and a ‘problem’ to be solved, which inevitably sets them apart from the rest of society (see e.g. Bungay et al., 2021; Calderaro and Giametta, 2019; Huschke, 2017; Graham, 2017). This framing, coupled with the dominance of laws which criminalise aspects of sex work, has created a context in which it is risky to publicly disclose sex work experience. Stigma is produced and reinforced in multiple contexts – in mainstream media, popular culture, in public consultations, debates and in laws (Benoit et al., 2018; Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022) – and is enacted in a vast range of environments. Recent research has highlighted how sex work stigma is embedded in a range of institutions, creating barriers for sex workers accessing justice if they are victims of violence, and accessing housing, and mental health support they may need (see e.g. Krüsi et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2021; Macioti et al., 2021; Stardust et al., 2021). Other studies have highlighted reluctance amongst participants to disclose their sex work experience when accessing primary health care services (Jobe, Stockdale and O’Neill, 2022). Thus, stigma is well-documented as an enduring issue that harms sex workers, manifesting structurally as a form of power which controls the options people have in everyday life vis-à-vis accessing services and expressing themselves authentically without fear of judgment.

On research journeys

‘How did you get interested in this area?’, is a question that researchers are commonly asked in a range of settings, including at conferences, in media engagements, and in a myriad of everyday interactions. It is a question that for some will be relatively simple to

answer. For others, however, for whom their personal biography is intertwined with the topic of interest, responding to this question may be more complex.

This question is one to which I have commonly given a standard answer – that I had learned of the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand through following media coverage on the tragic murders of five women who had worked on the streets as sex workers in the United Kingdom (Kinnell, 2008). At that time, I was considering post-graduate study, and the decriminalisation of sex work seemed like a very useful area to explore. This answer is a half-truth which side-steps the more personal details of my infinitely more complex journey.

The unfiltered truth is that my interest in this area began in my late teen years, during which I became increasingly drawn towards sex work. Although I was very interested in sex work, I did not (as far as I was aware) know anyone who did it, to whom I could ask direct questions. Furthermore, my interest confused me since – like everyone in society – I had been exposed to media representations which suggested sex work was inherently deviant, dangerous and not something a young woman should be actively seeking out. Part rebel and part ‘goodie two shoes’, I was intrigued, but I was also scared. Because of this, I ‘chickened out’ several times after making initial enquiries. Eventually, I overcame these anxieties and engaged in direct sex work on and off during a precarious phase of my life.

I stopped doing sex work when my circumstances changed, and while I was only involved in this area for a relatively short period, it represented a formative time for me. Although I retrospectively acknowledge that I got into sex work naively, it taught me a lot about people and their complexities and gave me a sense of control over my own body, along with a feeling of self-worth that I had previously lacked. Sex work also made my life easier, helping me to get by during a challenging, transitional phase of my life.

None of this makes me an expert on sex work. My experiences, however, have afforded me insights into some of the mundane everyday realities. I have felt the undercurrent of anxiety (while feigning confidence) walking through the lobby of an unfamiliar hotel. I know the range of experiences that can be had in the room with a client, and the tediousness of waiting for a booking. I know that sex work can be boring, exciting, frustrating, hilarious and awful, and that the nuances of it are so often missed in mainstream representations.

My own experiences also mean that sex work stigma is more than an abstract concept to me. I have long carried around the knowledge that there are some people who would consider my past experiences shameful and would not understand the decisions that I made at the time. I have also felt very deeply that shame and guilt that can accompany the secrecy that is necessary to protect against stigma. This is not something that I left behind when I stopped doing sex work. As a researcher of sex work, even while I have become slightly more open about my past experiences over time, I can still feel the tight knot in my stomach when I imagine being outed without my explicit consent, and the myriad of ways that people may respond to this information. Relatedly, I have continually felt the need to self-censor aspects of my experience (including while writing this article) because of how it could be interpreted by others. Thus, while I am not ashamed to have been paid for sex, stigma has had an ongoing impact on me.

The burden of concealment

Although many years have passed since I was involved in sex work, stigma has continued to have a significant impact on me both in the research context, and in my everyday life. Sex work researchers have written about the experience of stigma while undertaking research, describing how it can arise in university ethical approval processes, and in responses from colleagues who belittle sex work research (see e.g. [Boynton, 2002](#); [Ferris et al., 2021](#); [Hammond and Kingston, 2014](#); [Huysamen and Sanders, 2021](#)). [Hammond and Kingston, \(2014\)](#) explored this at length, using Goffman's concept of courtesy stigma, or 'stigma by association' to examine their experiences. They describe the stigma associated with sex work as being 'spread onto' them by virtue of their research in this area, and they argue that negative responses to their work echo some of the ways that stigma impacts sex workers (p. 330). For example, they outline instances in which their research was not taken seriously as an academic topic, it being viewed as dangerous, and assumptions being made about their sexuality in both their personal and professional lives. Thus, they conclude that reflexivity was imperative to them processing these interactions, and they encourage other researchers to implement this practice, both as an emotional management strategy and to yield vital research insights from these exchanges. Although I can empathise with and relate to such experiences, I have felt stigma not just 'by association' as a researcher, but also deep within myself as a person who has sex work experience. Although juvenile and belittling responses to my research have irked me, as a researcher, the most significant struggle I have had with stigma relates to the emotional consequences of concealing an important part of my human experience.

The management of personal information is a strategy to mitigate the risks of stigma that has been documented widely in research with several marginalised populations, including sex workers (see e.g. [Bowen, 2021](#); [Lynch and Rodell, 2018](#); [Wong et al., 2011](#)). When I was involved in sex work, I very carefully managed this information, choosing to only tell a select few people, to protect myself from judgment, shame, and a range of potential consequences. This dilemma has endured long after I was last paid for sex, having an ongoing presence in my personal and professional life. Although sex work is an uncomfortable topic for some people, it is also one which fascinates and generates curiosity. Inevitably, doing research on sex work often provokes a range of questions about why, what, where and how. In each of these interactions, I struggle with the question of, as [Goffman \(1963\)](#) puts it, whether 'to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on' about my own experience of sex work (p. 42).

For years I have felt caught in between two worlds and I struggled to find accounts of other researchers which resonate with my experience. It was only on discovering [Bruckert's \(2014\)](#) account of her experience that I began to make sense of the emotional quagmire I had been stuck in for so long. Bruckert reflects on her journey as a researcher and the emotional dilemmas she navigated as a former sex worker who was, for a significant period, 'in the closet' about her experiences. As I read Bruckert's reflections on how she was silenced by fear of the repercussions of stigma and the conflicting emotions she had to work through, it was a relief to recognise my own experience and complicated emotions. The 'disconcerting, fractured otherness' ([Bruckert, 2014](#), p. 308) that she

describes, and her oft conflicting emotions – of feeling like a hypocrite and a fraud for not disclosing, while also recognising that concealment was a legitimate protection strategy – helped me to make sense of my own struggles.

Like Bruckert, I have struggled with the dilemma of disclosing my lived experience. Conflicting feelings of wanting to talk about my experiences as part of my identity and journey, versus fearing rejection, shame and discrimination besieged me for years. This was exhausting and was ultimately an emotional dilemma that I had to resolve. Although all sex work researchers are likely to grapple with stigma to some extent, for those with sex work experience there is an additional layer of complexity. If you do not have direct experience of sex work, you do not have to grapple with questions about the level of outness with which you are comfortable, nor do you manage the omnipresent fear that you could be outed and have your experience used against you. Furthermore, I have struggled with guilt and shame, feeling that because of my privilege I have a responsibility to speak out. However, like Bruckert, I have also rationalised my silence, going back and forth with myself questioning whether I should share my experiences. Would I really be helping? As a person who now has considerable privilege, should I take up space? Would I be challenging stigma or reinforcing it? Are these just excuses so that I can justify continuing to hide? Conversations with trusted friends have only bolstered my reticence. I have been cautioned against sharing my lived experience due to the risk of being forever labelled, and because ‘that is all they will ever see’. Others have urged me to stay silent to protect those closest to me from shame. Conversely, one senior academic I impulsively confided in following a presentation looked at me vexed and exclaimed ‘why don’t you just come out?’, apparently unaware as to why this would be a dilemma at all. Such reactions have only added to my emotional paralysis.

Although this dilemma regarding whether to disclose stigmatised lived experience as a researcher remains relatively underexplored among sex work researchers, it has been examined in other fields. For example, in the field of convict criminology, academics who have criminal convictions have grappled with the question of whether (and when) to disclose their status as an ‘ex-con’, knowing that this information could be used against them (see e.g. [Catoe, 2021](#); [Ross et al., 2011, 2016](#)). This issue has also been examined by researchers in the drug research field. [Ross et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that, while there are legitimate and important reasons for concealment, not being transparent about experiential knowledge is contrary to the academic principles of integrity, openness and reflexivity. The authors go so far as to suggest that for scholars who value reflexivity, ‘silence on the issue is bad science’ ([Ross et al., 2020](#), p. 2). They also acknowledge, however, that researchers who ‘go public’ about their experiences risk having their research dismissed even when it is of the highest academic standard, and that their disclosure may inadvertently provide ammunition to prohibitionists who use the information to undermine their credibility. Nevertheless, they stress that disclosure may be personally and professionally important, in terms of staying true to activist goals, reducing cognitive dissonance, and the distress that can be felt from having to hide a part of one’s identity ([Ross et al., 2020](#)).

Similarly, publicly disclosing sex work experience is fraught with risk. The stereotypes that are associated with sex work (particularly the belief that sex workers are misguided,

untrustworthy and blinded by their own trauma) means that researchers who disclose sex work experience risk being dismissed and discredited. There is no legal protection from discrimination on this basis in most parts of the world, and some former sex workers have lost their careers, or experienced reputational damage, after information on their sex work experience became public (Dickson, 2013; Petro, 2012; Chan, 2019). Although there are academics in the sex work research field who have publicly disclosed lived experience of lap dancing and stripping (see e.g. Ahearne, 2015; Jones, 2020; Colosi, 2010), disclosing insider status relating to direct sex work (which is subject to deeper and more entrenched stigma, and more repressive laws) is particularly rare.

After overcoming her internal battle regarding ‘coming out’, Bruckert (2014) discovered that academia (in some corners) may be a marginally safer context to disclose sex work experience. Among some critical social science scholars, her experiential knowledge of sex work was highly respected and, if anything, it afforded her research more legitimacy. Nevertheless, outside of these safer spaces, researchers have also described experiencing invasive questioning, harassment and judgement when they have been open about their experiences (Ahearne, 2015; Stardust, 2020; Waring, 2020). The potential for harm is omnipresent and there are real consequences, which is why I have been so guarded. Although this has given me some protection from enacted stigma, it has also had taken an emotional toll on me and had implications for my research.

The implications of concealment

Positionality (the researcher’s identity and stance in relation to the research context), and reflexivity – the practice of the researcher analysing their positionality and its implications in the research process – are important concepts in qualitative research. Although the legacy of positivism dictates that research should be value free, ‘objective’, and conducted by detached and distant observers, these assumptions have long been widely critiqued, particularly by feminist standpoint scholars (see e.g. Haraway, 1988; Hill Collins, 1986; Code 1995; Brooks, 2007; Smith, 1997). In reflexive research, the researcher is actively involved in shaping the research at all stages, influenced by a range of factors, including their prior experiences and beliefs. Thus, there is no expectation that researchers will produce knowledge that is untainted by the self. On the contrary, knowledge produced by researchers who explicitly reflect on and interrogate their positioning is considered more objective than those who present themselves as impartial observers (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Smith, 1997).

Since reflexively examining our positionality involves laying bare personal beliefs and experiences and exploring how these may influence the research, it inevitably involves a degree of self-disclosure. Who we are, and the experiences we have had invariably impact how we approach our research and shapes our perspectives. To be reflexive, examining identity and related past experiences is important. This is challenging, however, for researchers who have stigmatised past experiences which, if revealed, exposes them to risk. Concealing this part of my life experience has meant that I have been constrained in my ability to openly reflect on my positionality. Although I have always been transparent

about my support of sex workers' rights, the hold that stigma has had over me has meant I have been too afraid to openly disclose my own experience of sex work.

Positionality is particularly fraught in sex work research. The phrase 'nothing about us without us' is used widely within the sex worker's rights movement to denote the importance of sex workers being involved in decisions and knowledge production about their lives (Dziuban and Stevenson, 2015). Although research can be useful in advocacy work, researchers can also cause harm. Sex worker researchers have emphasised the importance of centring sex worker knowledge, and research not only being informed by sex workers but led by them (Kim and Jeffries, 2013).

The value of lived experience appears to be recognised throughout the field of sex work studies, evident in the popularity of participatory methodologies and the recruitment of peer researchers to work on sex work projects (see e.g. Lobo et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2010; Sanders et al., 2018). The involvement of peer researchers in qualitative research more broadly is considered good practice, because they are thought to bring unique insights through lived experience of the topic under examination, balancing out academics who lack these insights (Kelly et al., 2018). Thus, academics are often presumed to be 'outsiders' and are set apart from the communities they do research with.

The presumption of outsider status is complicated for researchers who do have lived experience but are not ready to be 'out' about their experiences. In the sex work research field, while it is perhaps true that most researchers do not have lived experience, the supposition that academics will inevitably be outsiders is in part anchored in stigmatic beliefs regarding who current and former sex workers are, and the spaces in which they exist.

The politics of positionality in sex work research creates an emotional predicament for researchers who have sex work experience but feel unable to publicly disclose it because of stigma. Although most of the pressure I have managed regarding disclosure of my lived experience has come from within me, on rare occasions I have also experienced external pressure to be more explicit about my positionality. For example, an anonymous peer reviewer urged me to disclose my status, stating 'I wish the author would situate themselves in this text. Whether or not they are or were a sex worker absolutely matters'. They also cautioned me against exploring certain topics if I were not willing to bring my own personal experiences 'under the microscope' and objected to my use of the term 'whorephobia', suggesting that I modify my language unless I had sex work experience myself. This put me in an awkward position in which I had no choice other than disclosing my experience to respond to their comments, which was not safe for me at that point in my life. My discomfort in response to their feedback was also, I suspect, because deep down I knew that the reviewer had a point. Lived experience is relevant and it does make a difference.

Concealment has also constrained my ability to speak back to stigma from a position of my own lived experience in exchanges that have occurred both socially and professionally. In every interaction in which my research arises in conversation, I feel anxious. I anticipate how the person will respond, knowing that the response will indicate how they feel about sex work, and by extension what they would think of me if they knew about my

past experiences. This experience of stigma is clearly articulated by Hannem (2012), who notes:

‘The presence of a stigmatic attribute can have the effect of creating a power imbalance within an interaction between the stigmatized and the “normal”, even if the “normal” in the interaction is unaware of the threat that they pose to the discreditable individual. The discreditable individual, being aware of the possibility of discredit and stigma, is placed in a position of discomfort and thus may become guarded or tense in anticipation of a negative reaction’. (Hannem, 2012).

Although these interactions frequently end up being relatively benign (and sometimes positive), this is certainly not always the case. Stereotypes about sex workers infer that they are deviant, dangerous, ignorant, undesirable and irresponsible. Reflecting such beliefs, I have been asked if I feel safe interviewing ‘those types of people’, as though sex workers are dangerous individuals. I have also experienced people unable to keep a straight face, requiring me to say ‘sex work’ several times to fully comprehend what I have said. An acquaintance once introduced me as a researcher of ‘weird sex things’. Another person explained to me that they once knew someone who ‘went down that path’ of becoming a sex worker, and that they felt sorry for them. There are also instances in which sex work arises in contexts where my research interests are not known, such as the time a tour guide in Mexico recommended I move while I was standing next to some street art featuring a scantily clad woman in a photo, because they assumed I ‘wouldn’t want to stand next to the hooker’. These are just a handful of the interactions I have had over the years in which people have made their views clear, along with their assumption that I am not one of ‘those types of people’. Although I can (and do) challenge such stigmatising comments as a researcher, this does nothing to alleviate the sense of otherness I experience and the inner frustration of wanting to reveal my own experience but not feeling safe to do so.

This tension between wanting to challenge stigma but fearing the consequences of it has also featured in my interactions with the political context surrounding sex work. Sex work is a politically and ideologically fraught research topic, owing to a long history of prostitution being criminalised and stigmatised. Debates are emotionally charged and are often saturated with stigma. Among anti prostitution activists (and particularly a small, vocal subset of ‘radical’ feminists who aspire to eradicate the sex industry), explicit language is frequently used to convey their disgust. Mac and Smith (2018) note that the use of misogynistic, graphic language among anti prostitution activists, and particularly those who self-describe as radical feminists, has long been normalised in the public sphere. For example, in describing what happens in prostitution, Dworkin (1993) stated ‘her anus is often torn from the anal intercourse, it bleeds. Her mouth is a receptacle for semen’. She normalises this image, by emphasising ‘This is visceral, this is real, this is what happens’ (1993, p. 6). Similarly, in a book based on research which involved interviewing sex workers in Norway, two academics stated that ‘No one “wants” to rent out her vagina as a garbage can for hordes of anonymous men’s ejaculations’ (Hoigard and Finstad, 1987, p.180). In more recent years, anti-prostitution activists have continued to use explicit language in this way. For example, one activist opened a public talk with ‘Which one of you cunts wants to suck my dick?’, which she attributed to a man who had

entered a premises she once worked in, and referred to the ‘sucking and fucking’ involved (Gupta, 2018). Accounts of anti-prostitution activists are replete with stories of women’s bodies being permanently damaged by commercial sex, of sex workers being left bleeding having seen dozens of clients in a night, and the cautionary tales of people who now regret having worked in the sex industry. Radical feminist journalist Julie Bindel, for example, states that among women she has interviewed she has heard about ‘the pain of a dry, bruised vagina being penetrated by multiple men. The horror of having his semen or other bodily fluids anywhere near her face. His beard rubbing her cheek until she bleeds’ (Bindel, 2021). Bindel also denies that sex workers can be academics (and vice versa), arguing that while some academics ‘claim’ to have sex work experience, they have in fact merely ‘dabbled in aspects of the sex trade as part of their field research’ (2019, p. 268–269). Those who challenge such portrayals are, as Phipps (2017) notes, charged with being ‘unrepresentative’ and part of a ‘pimp lobby’ who seek to speak over the ‘voiceless’ about whose interest’s anti-prostitution activists claim to speak (2017, p. 314). This dismissing of alternate experiences, Phipps notes, is an attempt to silence those who do not conform to this very specific, stigma laden narrative (Phipps, 2015). Thus, stigma is a weapon that is called on by anti-prostitution campaigners in public debates and is relied upon to convey a single unwavering narrative about the sex industry.

When reading and hearing such accounts, which are dehumanising and do not align with my own experience nor the many experiences I have heard as a researcher, I have felt frustrated and angry. This has at times goaded me to consider sharing my experience to challenge these stigmatising narratives and ‘truth’ claims about sex work. I have also been aware, however, that doing so could make me a target for abuse. Furthermore, I have felt that sharing my experience in these circumstances would mean yielding to a political strategy that is highly problematic and exploitative. Like Phipps, I believe that personal stories are incredibly valuable, but I feel strongly that these should not be used as ideological currency, wielded as power, and a ‘trump card’ to undermine different viewpoints. Instead, we must be open to hearing and valuing a diversity of experiences, and to sit with messy, complex and contradictory realities to ‘connect across difference’ (Phipps, 2015, p. 314). Nevertheless, I have felt very frustrated observing these portrayals and I have been troubled by the persistent feeling that I should be braver and bolder in challenging these representations.

Who am I? Reflecting on Stigma and Positionality

Although my fear of stigma and its consequences has constrained my ability to publicly reflect on my positionality in my research, over the years of managing this emotional struggle, I have thought very deeply about my research identity and the significance of my personal experiences. Although my experience of sex work and stigma may mean that I am thought of as an insider researcher, like many researchers in a range of areas, I have come to realise that positionality is often more complex than the binary categories of insider and outsider (see e.g. Adeagbo, 2020; Breen, 2007; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Gair, 2012; Nelson, 2020; Brayboy and Deyhle, 2000; DeLyser, 2001). My positionality is best described as liminal because I straddle insider and outsider status.

I feel very comfortable in the sex worker community, and when I am among sex workers who know of my past experiences, there is a sense of shared experience, and being in on a secret, which feels affirming and liberating. It is always a relief to not have to hide this aspect of my life experience and to feel 'normal'. In the research context, while doing interviews with sex workers, I often hear experiences and thoughts that are very familiar and spark memories of my own. Simultaneously, however, I am aware of my otherness as someone who is now an academic researching the experiences of sex workers. I have also, at times, internally downplayed the relevance of own experience due to the time that has now passed since that time of my life.

Furthermore, while experiences I hear during research sometimes personally resonate and invoke echoes from the past, I am also acutely aware that my experience can at times be starkly different to those of research participants. For example, when interviewing Gail – a Māori, transgender, street-based sex worker – she recalled becoming homeless as a teenager, being forced to leave school and becoming involved in street-based sex work in these circumstances. Gail was subsequently criminalised as a sex worker and drug user, which continued to impact her decades later. Insider researchers are typically understood to be those who have experience which provides deep familiarity with the experiences of the group focussed on in the research (Griffith, 1998). The sex worker population is, however, incredibly diverse in terms of personal biographies, race, class, gender, perspectives on the work, different forms of sex work experience, along with locations and contexts in which it takes place. Lived experience does not necessarily equal shared experience (Stardust, 2020). Thus, in the context of these diverse realities, there are times when my own experience feels quite irrelevant. As a researcher, over the past 15 years I have met countless sex workers who have many years of sex work experience, in a wide range of areas, and have knowledge that extends far beyond my own. Therefore, more than anything else, my research experiences have taught me how partial my personal insights are. Knowledge, as Haraway (1988) has argued, is always situated. Stigma homogenises people with sex work experience and erases the diversity that exists between individuals, their pathways, experiences, and how they make sense of them. Although my personal experience has given me useful insights, my own experience does not form the basis of my knowledge, nor does it make me an all-knowing authority on sex work.

Conclusion

Writing this article has been an immensely emotional experience and is the product of many years of rumination and introspection. In this article, I have shared my personal experience of sex work, my inner struggle concealing these experiences due to my fear of stigma, and I have reflected on the complications of my positionality. Clearly, to write this article, I have had to disclose my past experiences. This may lead some to question why I have now decided to disclose information that poses risk and has been the source of so much anxiety.

The simple truth is that I am tired of hiding an important part of my human experience. I have recognised the power that stigma has had over me, forcing me to self-censor as a protection strategy, and controlling my capacity to be authentic. Sex work is just one

aspect of my life experience that has shaped my identity, but it in the context of my research it is an important one. Although concealing my personal experience of sex work may have buffered me from the harms of enacted stigma, the emotional pressure of concealment has been profound. Focusing on stigma in my research has forced me to confront the impact it has had on me and has required me to work through my fears. As Nelson has noted, in addition to creating knowledge, research can also become a 'journey of self-exploration' (Nelson, 2020, p.923). My experiences of sex work have given me insights that are useful to me as a researcher, giving me a visceral understanding of what it is like to live with a secret, to feel different and to fear the consequences of stigma. These insights shape the approach I take in my research, the questions I choose to focus on, and often strengthens the extent to which I can meaningfully connect with participants during interviews. At the same time, doing research in this area has helped me to make sense of my own experiences and the subsequent struggles that I have had to work through. Although getting to this point has been emotionally challenging, like Johnston (2019), I believe that researching what we have lived ourselves is not something that we should shy away from. In focussing on issues that are deeply personal, we can also gain a deeper understanding into ourselves and our experiences and integrate this into the knowledge that we produce.

Stigma is part of the weaponry of those who oppose sex workers' rights, helping to uphold a narrative that engagement in sex work is intrinsically harmful to individuals and society. The maintenance of stigma, in part, relies on the silencing and marginalisation of those who are subject to it. Although concealment is undoubtedly an important protection strategy, it has been recognised that breaking the silence by sharing personal experience can be an effective strategy for researchers and others to challenge stigma and stereotypes (Corrigan, 2005; Ross et al., 2020). As an academic, I benefit from doing research with sex workers, this forms the basis of my career, and I frequently have the privilege of a platform to talk about sex work. Therefore, like Bruckert (2014), I believe that when in such a privileged position, 'we must, on occasion, "put ourselves on the line" and "get naked"' about our own experiences and struggles (2014, p. 219). To be clear, however, it is not my intention to suggest that people coming out about sex work experience is the solution to stigma. I write this article in solidarity with those who cannot talk about their experiences, to highlight how emotionally draining this can be, and to illustrate the injustice of experiential ways of knowing remaining marginalised.

A significant part of my own struggle has been feeling alone in relation to this part of my identity as a researcher. Therefore, I hope that this article might provide some solace to other academics and researchers who have experience that is stigmatised, and are managing similar struggles, both in the sex work research space and beyond. Stigma is an insidious form of power that is not easily overcome. In sharing our experiences when we feel safe enough to do so, we can partially disrupt its influence, push back against it and reclaim the power to live authentically in our own truth.

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